Reading is Not Optional

BY PAUL BUYER

A colleague of mine recently guest conducted an All-County band. During the traditional three-hour rehearsal to begin the weekend, he discovered that several of the percussionists could not read music. Not only were they unable to read rhythms, they failed to come in after multi-measure rests. Even with exaggerated cues from the conductor, parts went by in silence. These were supposed to be the best players in the county—recommended and selected by their band directors.

During the band's first break, the percussionists took out practice pads and marching sticks from their backpacks. For the next few minutes, they started ramming notes from their fall marching show, chops galore. What they were playing was impressive, obviously memorized, and most likely learned by rote. When my colleague noticed how the students were spending their break, he decided to walk back there and have a talk with them. Imagine the discussion. What would you say?

As educators, we have the power to choose what we teach and how we teach it. For the most part, our teaching is directly connected to what we believe in, our values, and our philosophy. Sometimes, it is not what we teach that is the problem, but what we leave out. Too often, reading and counting are simply not taught. Why? Some never get around to it. Some do not have the time. Some say it is the student's responsibility. Some think it will happen by osmosis. Some deny it is even a problem. So when did reading become optional?

How can a student be in band for four years, practice a musical instrument, perform concerts, win awards, and never learn one of the most basic skills of the art form?

According to Robert Hounchell, former Percussion Professor at Indiana State University: "The average musician's rhythmic training leaves much to be desired…the problem exists in every medium. Precisely why this is true is not easy to determine; however, if we became general enough, the answer is rather obvious: the average musician has not been sufficiently trained in the skill of rhythmic reading [and]…has not been adequately informed concerning the conventions of rhythmic notation."

Why are so many students falling through the cracks? How can a student be in band for four years, practice a musical instrument, perform concerts, win awards, and never learn one of the most basic skills of the art form? Why are the directors, parents, and students themselves content with accepting weak reading skills? Why don't they do anything about it?

Reading music is a skill that can be learned and ideally should be introduced at the beginning levels of music instruction. Reading skills include reading and playing rhythms, counting, subdividing, understanding rests, and developing an awareness of how a rhythm sounds and feels in a given tempo. In percussion, reading also implies an understanding of sticking concepts and the ability to watch a conductor.

My very first percussion lesson was with the late Richard Paul, formerly of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra and percussion teacher at Ball State University. I remember sitting in his office talking about my musical experience in high school. After telling him I played the snare drum, I pointed to the marimba and said, "but I don't play *that*"—as if I didn't have to; as if it were optional. He made it very clear to me that if I wanted to pursue a degree in percussion, I would have to learn how to play the marimba.

Why is reading any different? The following questions motivated me to write this article—questions that I believe need to be addressed in the course of our teaching.

- Why do so many high school percussionists come to college with weak reading skills? Why didn't they learn to read in middle school and high school?
- How can students have such enjoyable and successful band experiences in high school and never learn how to read well?
- Why can percussionists count "digga-digga-dut" but not "1e&a 2"?
- Why do students have so many problems with rests?
- Why do students have problems playing in time?

Answers to these questions are not easily discovered. However, one of the key factors influencing percussionists' weak reading skills is a lack of leadership and, more specifically, teacher apathy. According to Webster's dictionary, apathy is defined as a "lack of emotion…lack of interest: indifference." I mentioned earlier that we have the power to choose what we teach, and with that power comes the ability to prioritize and emphasize what we feel are the most important skills our students should develop. Surely in our culture, reading is one of those skills.

Musicians who do not know how to read music can be compared to English students who do not know how to read a book. Such students are forced to fake their way through the class, learn by ear, hide their weaknesses, and believe that it is either too late to learn or that reading is not required to be successful.

COUNTING

Counting is the ability to count rhythms aloud using subdivided beats. For example, eighth notes are counted "1& 2& 3& 4&" and sixteenth notes are counted "1e&a 2e&a 3e&a 4e&a." Counting should not be confused with "drum speak," where drummers and percussionists sing rhythms using random syllables such as "digga digga dut" or "biggida biggida gok."

The ability to count *in time* is very important to understanding the relationship between rhythm and tempo. Saying beats correctly but out of time does not provide the student with a musical context. Through repetition, counting rhythms in time with a metronome teaches students to articulate rhythms and hear how they sound *before* they play them. The ability to count and play at

the same time is also beneficial and helps develop coordination, confidence, and an awareness of sticking.

Steve Houghton, jazz drummer, author, and Associate Professor of Percussion at Indiana University, follows a "can't sing – can't play" rule with his drumset students. According to Houghton, "A player who can't sing a [jazz] phrase with the right articulation will probably never play it correctly. Certain syllables are commonly used when 'singing' contemporary rhythms and phrases. The syllables verbally represent what the note or phrase will sound like when played."

Why is counting so important? It allows players to figure out rhythms on their own, determine on what beat a rhythm begins and ends, and it vastly improves reading skills.

RESTS

Music is sometimes defined as the combination of sound and silence. I am always amazed when percussionists struggle with rests and the power a rest has to throw a player off. Possible reasons for this include skipping over rests in practice, not taking them seriously, not using a metronome, and a lack of concentration.

While most musicians focus on playing the printed notes, many forget to "play the rests," which means treating them with the same respect as the notes. Maybe the issue is in the name itself; mentally, we want to "rest during rests." According to Hounchell, "Rhythmic reading is keeping track of time. While reading rhythmically a person may or may not be required to make a sound; nevertheless, silences must also be counted by the mind." In addition, University of Arizona Percussion Professor Gary Cook states, "Thinking of rests as 'silent notes' helps."

Another reference I use is the Dave Matthews Band song "The Space Between." It is the space between the notes that defines the rhythm and creates an awareness of how a rhythm sounds in a given tempo. Rests also allow players to *breathe* in the music, something young percussionists should be taught how to do. Understanding the duration of a rest is also necessary for one to play in time with rhythmic accuracy.

The best way I have found to teach rests is to play with a metronome. Students are able to hear the beats they do not play and start to "play off" the auditory feedback of the metronome, similar to a drumset player kicking a band. In time, students begin to hear and feel the rests by internalizing the tempo and not depending on the metronome.

Finally, multi-measure rests should never be an issue if the player has the ability to focus, count, watch the conductor, and, most importantly, listen to the ensemble. Educators should teach percussionists to see the big picture of a piece of music by embracing their role when they play and respecting the moments when they do not.

TIMING

Timing refers to the ability to play in time. Poor timing is caused by the inability to subdivide, the inability to count rests, and practicing without a metronome.

To "subdivide" means to divide something into smaller pieces. In music, it refers to dividing the beat into smaller parts ("1e&a," etc.). The inability to subdivide can cause serious timing problems and a lack of control, especially at slow tempos. Have you ever noticed players who are "wired" to think that sixteenth notes are always played fast? In reality, rhythms are neither fast nor slow. They simply are what they are depending on the tempo.

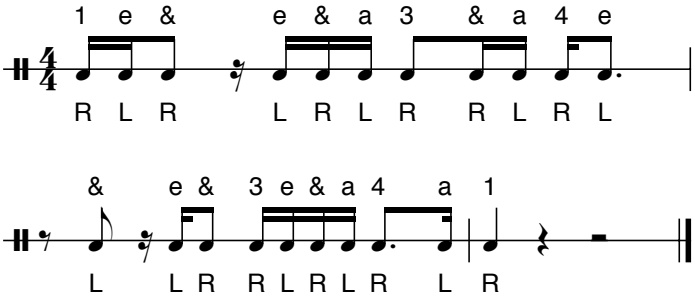
The inability to count rests can also cause serious timing problems. When rests are not given their full value, rhythms are not played in time. As mentioned earlier, *the space between the notes defines the rhythm*. "Jumping" or cheating rests is often problematic when playing syncopated rhythms and upbeat entrances.

Without question, the best way to develop good timing skills is to practice with a metronome or other electronic transmission such as recordings. Eventually however, musicians must develop the ability to play in time *without a metronome*. Far too often, a metronome becomes a crutch and players become dependant on its ability to keep them from rushing or dragging. Percussionists must move beyond just *following* the metronome to *leading* the ensemble without one.

After good timing skills are developed, musicians must remember that they are human beings, not machines. Being aware of a conductor's phrasing, a natural relaxation or push in tempo, and listening skills are all part of becoming a good ensemble player.

STICKING

Another important aspect of developing good reading skills is an understanding and awareness of basic sticking concepts. According to author and educator Tom Siwe, "Students who have a clear understanding of the need for stickings that correspond to the music and who practice often-used [snare drum] patterns will play more musically and become better [sight] readers." Knowing the inherent sticking of a given rhythm is most common to sixteenth-note rhythms and timing patterns.



The above sticking policy is known as the right-hand lead system or the "Straight system," named after Edward B. Straight. According to Bob Breithaupt, Percussion Professor at Capital University: "The right-hand lead system promotes the theory that the right hand, assumed to be the strong hand, plays all the strong or 'down' parts of the beat, while the left hand plays the 'weak' beats…As the student becomes more advanced, the instructor may introduce certain sticking scenarios which promote smoother phrasing…This technique may result in a more even sound, better ensemble, and greater sight-reading ability, due to the kinesthetic, or 'muscle memory' of sticking the figure the same each time."

It is important to point out that sticking decisions lead to phrasing decisions. As a percussionist becomes more advanced, experimentation with sticking is encouraged. However, no matter how advanced the player, right-hand lead sticking policies are fundamental and are used in many situations.

When teaching sticking concepts for sixteenth-note rhythms, I follow three simple steps:

1. Identify what beats are played.
2. Identify what beats are not played.
3. Identify the sticking of the remaining (written) rhythm.

WRITING MUSIC

One of the best ways to improve one's ability to read music is to write music. Writing music for a drumline, percussion ensemble, steel band, or soloist is a valuable learning tool and requires expert knowledge of notation, meter, and rhythm. Today's music notation software programs such as Finale and Sibelius presume accurate input of rhythmic notation and will not accept inaccurate rhythms and note values. Because only accurate notation is accepted, an individual's reading skills can significantly improve by working with these programs over time.

DEVELOPING READING SKILLS

Developing reading skills in percussion can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Method books such as Jeff Queen's *The Next Level*, Peter Erskine's *Time Awareness*, Joel Rothman's *Teaching Rhythm for All Instruments*, Louis Bellson's *Modern Reading Text in 4/4*, Garwood Whaley's *Basics in Rhythm*, and Lalo Davila's *Play at First Sight* are all great resources for developing reading skills, timing skills, and sticking concepts.

A popular assignment I have given on a regular basis is for students to take a snare drum solo or etude and write in all the counts as well as the sticking. During private lessons, I ask students to count rhythms aloud at different tempos, calling their attention to whether or not they are counting in time. For extreme cases, I take out my Dr. Beat DB-88, turn on the "voice," and ask students to count along with the metronome. On occasion, I have also stopped a rehearsal to ask for volunteers to count a particular rhythm. Keep in mind that the most important thing is to spend time teaching your students how to read, regardless of the resources you use. If they see that you value reading skills as important, they will be more likely to do the same.

CONCLUSION

It is common for music students who have not developed solid reading skills to survive learning by ear. Aural learning, such as in the Suzuki method, is considered superior for teaching music to children and emphasizes music memorization, internalization, expression, observation, imitation, and technical mastery. Although some people are convinced that reading skills somehow diminish these musical attributes, exclusively learning by ear can become a "way out" for students to enjoy their musical experience without ever improving.

While many cultures around the world learn music by ear and do not read notation, we are not doing our students a favor by not teaching them how to read. We must communicate to them that reading is not optional if they want to achieve success as a musician.

Ideally, learning should take place through "triple channel learning," which includes visual, auditory, and kinesthetic awareness (VAK). In addition to learning kinesthetically (by feel), which is inherent to percussion playing, students should learn by ear (how something sounds) as well as "by eye" (visually).

Being able to read music at a high level builds confidence and self-esteem that goes a long way toward students reaching their full potential as players, teachers, conductors, composers, arrangers, and musicians.

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